Politicians are the real target; Climate action

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Body

Going after companies to recoup what the public purse pays for their unhealthy products holds a lot of popular appeal.

It's been done with tobacco companies and the drug manufacturers that push deadly opioids. And now oil companies are increasingly being sued by governments over the mounting costs of climate change.

City councillor Mike Layton followed the trend this week when he proposed that Toronto think about joining the ranks of American cities that have taken big oil to court over the rising infrastructure costs of floods and storms.

"Polluters should pay," Layton argues.

Let's set aside, for the moment, that we, as citizens who drive our vehicles around every day, are the ultimate polluters.

Oil companies have played a significant and shameful role in disseminating misinformation that casts doubt on the science of a warming Earth, and the link between carbon emissions and climate change. And they continue to bolster those who argue that dramatic action isn't urgently needed.

But here's the rub: plenty of politicians in Canada (and elsewhere) happily do the very same thing every day.

Governments have long known that burning fossil fuels comes with a cost that future generations may not be able to survive, let alone pay.

There's no question oil companies produce a product that's harmful to the environment. But it's up to government to wean us off their products by supporting clean alternatives to the way we transport ourselves and our goods and heat and light our homes and businesses.

Our elected leaders aren't doing that quickly or comprehensively enough. Worse, some are actively undermining the efforts of those who are trying to make progress.

We're seeing the latest version of that play out as Conservative premiers, including Ontario's Doug Ford, attack Ottawa for putting a price on carbon.

On Monday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's program for provinces like Ontario, without a suitable plan of their own, will extend to cover fuels, including gasoline.

As he has done since taking power, Ford will do all he can to undermine this necessary step, falsely calling it a "job-killing carbon tax."

And federal Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer plans a mass-texting campaign to once again try and turn a positive environmental measure into a negative political talking point.

So, if Toronto city council wants to take up the fight for the planet, and it has billions of reasons to do so, there's a better way than a wing-and-a-prayer lawsuit.

Canada's largest city can be a powerful voice in opposing policies that undermine climate action and supporting those that work. And if councillors are looking for terrible policies to fight, they need only look up the road to Queen's Park.

The Ford government has killed Ontario's cap-and-trade program, along with the green energy projects and conservation programs it helped support, and is battling Ottawa in court. Ford is in fact happy to spend $30 million in taxpayers' money to take the province backwards on climate change.

Toronto council had no problem attacking Ford's folly on transit this week. His (lack of) climate plan is just as worthy a target.

The city should support Ottawa's carbon-pricing plan as an important step forward. Yes, Canadians will pay a bit more upfront but they'll get 90 per cent of it back as a tax rebate with the rest invested in programs to combat climate change.

At the same time, the city should do more itself.

Toronto, after all, hasn't bothered to bring back the vehicle registration fee that the premier's late brother Rob Ford got rid of when he was mayor. And it continues to underfund infrastructure, such as bike lanes, that could get more people out of cars.

Change is never easy. As the U.S. federal judge who last year threw out a case by two California cities against big oil noted, we've operated one way since the Industrial Revolution.

"The development of our modern world has literally been fuelled by oil and coal," wrote Judge William Alsup. "Would it really be fair to now ignore our own responsibility in the use of fossil fuels and place the blame for global warming on those who supplied what we demanded?"

There may be a court case that will succeed against oil companies, but so far in the U.S., they have not. There's even less cause for optimism in the Canadian legal system.

But there is definitely a public case to be made against political leaders, like Ford and Scheer, who insist on putting their heads in the sand and refuse to take the steps on climate that are needed.

Indeed, we're now in a bizarre world in which an energy company like Exxon publicly supports a carbon tax while Ford and Scheer do not. Chevron stands behind the Paris climate accord, which U.S. President Donald Trump has abandoned and Ford is undermining with his climate-lite plan for Ontario.

We need to force our elected leaders, at all levels of government, to lead on climate change. Turning to the courts is a false hope.

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